

[**The tragic story of how one third of Lithuania’s population became victims of Soviet terror**](http://vilnews.com/?p=2168)

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This article is based on a speech manuscript by Dalia Kuodyte,

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**“In the trains’ cattle cars the passengers were hardly given any food except from a little water and some inedible soup. There was scarcely any air to breathe as everyone was jammed together and the cars had only a few small windows covered with bars. A hole in the floor served as a toilet. Some of the people, especially the infants became sick immediately and died. The bodies of those who died on the journey were left on the side of the tracks.”**

The string of tragedies began in August 1939, when Hitler and Stalin concluded a cynical agreement that divided up Central Europe between the two totalitarian countries. According to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, Lithuania was to fall into the Soviet zone of influence.  
  
After the outbreak of the Second World War, Lithuania was occupied three times: first by the USSR in 1940, then by Nazi Germany in 1941, and finally by the USSR again in 1944.   
  
Pre-war Lithuania’s position of neutrality on the eve of WWII did not protect the country from its sad fate. According to Lithuanian state institutions, the damage caused by the USSR‘s occupation to the Republic of Lithuania in financial terms is $278 billion. During Nazi and Soviet occupations, including 200,000 Holocaust victims, the losses of the population of Lithuania amounted to 33 percent of the total number of the country's population in 1940. Lithuania lost 1 million people to deportations, executions, incarceration, the murder of the political opposition and forced emigration.

The total number of persons registered as “anti-Soviet elements” reached 320,000 entries. There were teachers and professors, school and college students, farmers, industry workers and craftsmen among them.  
  
June 14-18, 1941 were the dark days of the first massive arrest and deportation of the Lithuanian population. A cargo of 16,246 people were crammed into cattle cars. Moscow’s instruction required separate men from their families. So, 3,915 men were separated and transported to concentration camps in the Krasnoyarsk territory while 12,331 women, children and elderly people were transported to the Altai Mountains territory, the Komi republic and to the Tomsk region.   
  
Forty percent these deportees were children below 16 years old. More than half of the deported died quickly. Pregnant women and babies born in the cattle cars were the first victims – they died in the trains. The deportation process was interrupted by the German-Soviet war.  
  
The Soviets resumed mass deportations to Siberia and other eastern regions of the USSR after recapturing Lithuania from Nazi Germany in 1944. The partisan anti-Soviet war for democratic and independent Lithuania began in 1944. Some 22,000 Lithuanian partisans lost their lives in unequal war against the Soviet regular army and NKVD units. From 1949 the armed resistance started to wane. This guerilla war continued until 1953. The last resistance fighter refused to surrender and shot himself in 1965.  
  
Partisans, their supporters and non-armed opposition made up a big group among those who were deported in 1945 – 1947. Another big group of deportees was those who tried to escape service in the Red Army. Ethnic Germans and members of their families, who did not leave Lithuania, were deported as well.   
  
The situation changed in 1948. The most extensive deportation from Lithuania was held on May 22 and 23, 1948. Over these two days 12,100 families, numbering over 41,000 people, were seized from their homes and exiled. In 1948, 50 percent of deportees were accused not of their relations with the armed guerillas. Their official guilt was their social class – they were owners of private farms. In 1949, already two-thirds of the deportees belonged to this category while in 1951 they absolutely dominated the Soviet secret police‘s statistics.   
  
Such change was due to the collectivization campaign in the Lithuania’s countryside. In 1948, the Soviets started to implement mass collectivization, appropriating land and livestock. This resulted in establishment of kolkhozes. In 1950, some 90 percent of land was given to kolkhozes. Mass deportations continued until the death of Josef Stalin in 1953.

How did the typical deportation look? The NKVD broke into an apartment or house and arrested all the family members. The NKVD marched them onto the back of a truck. In the railway station as far as the eye could see there were men and women clutching suitcases and bundles of hastily gathered clothing, the elderly and the disabled searching for places to sit and mothers holding their children, all surrounded by Red Army soldiers brandishing weapons.   
  
Usually, the men were put on separate trains. They usually were transported to prisons and the Gulags (concentration camps) while females, kids and the elderly were deported to live in God-forsaken settlements in Siberia.   
  
In the cattle cars the passengers were given hardly any food except a little water and some inedible soup. There was scarcely any air to breathe as everyone was jammed together and the cars had only a few small windows covered with bars. A hole in the floor served as a toilet. Some of the people, especially the infants became sick immediately and died. The bodies of those who died on the journey were left on the side of the tracks.  
  
After one month the train reached some Siberian center - for example, Novosibirsk. In this case, scores of wagons were transferred onto enormous barges and sent up the River Ob to some remote settlement to live in a bug-infested hut.  
  
The Soviets immediately put their prisoners to work. They forced women and teenage girls to march into the forest to cut trees. They worked in deep snow, even as temperatures plunged to minus 45 degrees Celsius. Prisoners cut up trees and later lived in huts made from those tree branches. Sometimes it was so cold they awoke frozen to the ground.  
  
Some deportees collapsed while the guards pushed the others along to another day of work. The collapsed prisoners were then left for dead somewhere behind in the wilderness.  
  
In exchange for their efforts, prisoners received a small amount of hard bread. They were working for food. A full day of hard work was equal to 500 grams of bread. Physically weaker prisoners could only earn 100 grams of bread.  
  
Working prisoners shared their meager rations with those who could not work – the little children, the old and the infirm. Much of the time people had virtually nothing to eat and everyone suffered from constant hunger. Their bodies were swollen and covered with boils caused by malnutrition. Their skin was inflamed by mosquito bites.   
  
The youngest children were affected the most by the harsh conditions and almost all of them were sick. Many of them died from starvation and disease. The elderly followed the children. Those who remained could only struggle to dig graves in the frozen earth.   
  
Gradually, the survivors tried to adjust to life in Siberia. Deportees were permitted to use a patch of ground on which to grow potatoes.  
  
In 1956, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev decided that deportees should be released. In late 1950s, the survivors started to return to Lithuania.

There is an old and cynical saying that one death is a tragedy, but a thousand are just a front-page headline. Well, of course, deaths of thousands of deportees began to make headlines only in late the 1980s. Let’s look to personal tragedies.   
  
The Šiauliai Aušros Museum has 234 letters of political prisoners, deportees and partisans addressed to their family members and loved ones who managed to escape the Soviet terror in Lithuania.   
  
Lawyer Ignas Urbaitis from town of Šiauliai was arrested on October 6, 1944. He was sentenced for 15 years of slavery work in concentration camps. He died in the Taishet concentration camp in the Irkutsk region in 1952.   
  
He wrote letters to his wife Elena Urbaitienė. In 1947, he wrote, “I’m always walking in the room. Sometimes there is very little room left for it. Sometimes I can make just one step or even less because the room is covered by sleeping or lying bodies. I walk anyway. Other people find it strange. If you can imagine me, imagine me walking backwards and forwards like an animal in the zoo cage. Walking gives comfort to my nerves and heart.”  
  
Urbaitis, like all prisoners of concentration camps, was allowed to write only two letters per year. These letters should be written in Russian because all letters were read by the censors. So, prisoners avoided to write about their sufferings directly because of this censorship.  
  
The survivors of the Gulags and deportations can speak openly now. Former deportee Janė Meškauskaitė says that she and her family was kidnapped by the NKVD one night because her father was member of the ruling Tautininkų Party in the pre-war Lithuania. Her family was put on a train and dropped off at a remote village in the Tomsk region many days later.   
  
They were among the more fortunate deportees, as Russian farmers from Kazakhstan who were exiled in the early 1930s for being to wealthy inhabited the village. They understood her family‘s plight and welcomed them into society. Nevertheless, food was scarce.  
  
“My father once bought some meat from a local crook. He and a friend hid in the woods to cook and eat it so that thugs wouldn’t steal it. They found out later that they were eating a friend of theirs who had just died,” said Meškauskaitė.  
  
Bread was also strictly rationed. “People in our village were allotted 300 grams of flour a day. One time the flourmill broke down so we were simply given whole grains. People were so hungry that they would just eat them uncooked. Of course, most had bad teeth and couldn’t chew them so they would end up undigested in the latrines. Many people would go and collect them, wash them, and make porridge,” she said.  
  
Vytautas Stašaitis was a son of an air force major in pre-World War II independent Lithuania. The family’s spacious house was commandeered by Soviets troops in 1945. His family was exiled to Siberia but he managed to go underground as part of the resistance movement.  
  
Shortly thereafter a supposed friend lured him into a trap. He was asked to supply ammunition for an assassination attempt on the head of the local NKVD. His “friend” gave him up and he was mercilessly beaten during his interrogation.   
  
“I wanted to hang myself in my cell but they prevented me. They gave me 10 years forced labor for sedition and shipped me to Krasnoyarsk to cut trees. They marched us for six days with barely any food and water. Those who couldn’t keep up were shot. When we got to the labor camp they clothed us in the uniforms of dead soldiers. They still had bullet holes and blood stains,” Stašaitis said adding that political prisoners were forced to live together with aggressive Russian criminals who were sentenced for murders and robbery.   
  
Life in Stalin-era labor camps was a dehumanizing experience. The diet allocated to prisoners was less than that required for survival. “As inmates we were chained in pairs. Once my partner and I thought a wolf was attacking us. It turned out to be a guard dog that had broken loose from its chain. We killed it with our axes and buried it in the snow. We returned many times to cook and eat it. Those were some of the best meals of my life,” he said.  
  
Life was not easy for those who survived and returned to Lithuania. Meškauskaitė returned to Lithuania in 1958. “We were placed in an impossible situation. The government required us to register with the local municipality or face renewed deportation. In order to register, we needed an employer, but no one would have courage to give a work to former deportee. I lived and worked illegally for many years with the help of relatives,” she said.  
  
Now former political prisoners, deportees and partisans receive an additional pension, which Lithuanian state finances can manage. Russia, which officially proclaimed inheritance of all international rights and obligations of the USSR, shows no will to pay compensation to them. The Russian state has never said a word asking for forgiveness for the Soviet terror in the occupied Baltic states. However, it was done by Russian dissidents.   
  
Russian Duma MP Sergey Kovalev did it in the Lithuanian parliament in June, 2000. By the way, it is symbolic that in 1974-1975, Kovalev was jailed in the Vilnius KGB prison, which is the Museum of Genocide Victims now, for cooperation with the underground magazine The Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church.  
  
Kovalev said in his address to the Lithuanian parliament, “It is not true that nations do not commit crimes. The Germans and we should understand it. If we don’t understand our guilt, we can’t expect victory over cannibalistic ideologies. We went to demonstrations in the 1930s supporting mass killings. We are guilty, our Western neighbors. It is my nation that occupied the Baltic countries. Please, forgive us.”   
  
Felix Krasavin, a former Soviet-time political prisoner now living in Israel, spoke to the forum of some 5,000 former Lithuanian political prisoners and deportees in the Vilnius Sport Arena in June, 2000. “Soviet fascism killed many more people than its German brother. The lies of Soviet fascism were much bigger than those of German fascism,” he said.  
  
During their nearly five decades of occupation, the Soviets killed or deported hundreds of thousands Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian men, women and children. However, this was only a fraction of the tens of millions of people in the USSR and Central Europe whom communists subjected to the midnight knock on the door, arrest, intentionally created famine and starvation, torture, slave labor, or execution.  
  
Nicolas Werth, French historian and one of the authors of “Livre noir du communisme (The Black Book of Communism)” say the communists killed at least 100 million people in the world. During his lecture in Vilnius University in 2000, he said communism was born in Russia because this country had no democratic experience. During 80 years, one-third of the planet’s population lived under communist regimes. "The closer the country was to the center of repression [Moscow], the more the models of repression were similar to the Soviet ones: public trials, tortures, killings, deportations,” he said.  
  
Virtually no one has been called to account for what was done. The West has chosen to forget these horrors. Nothing of these horrors is taught in their schools. There is no grand museum in Washington, D.C., dedicated to those whose lives were destroyed by the communists.  
  
No Communist Party bosses in Russia have ever been made to pay for their transgressions. Not one labor camp commandant has been forced to answer for his inhumanity. There is no talk of reparations. The Kremlin objects whenever anyone raises questions about the injustice of the past.   
  
The great crimes of Soviet communism are mostly just remembered in the hearts and souls of the victims.  
  
Lithuanians are considering the Soviet terror corresponded to genocide. Most of those deported were doomed - a third of them to a speedy death and the rest to a life of misery in Siberia. One only had to be an honest Lithuanian citizen to face deportation. A lot of work has to be done to clarify world opinion.